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Próximos Passos  
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April 13, 2015

Commission on Immigrant Affairs  
City of Austin  
301 W. 2nd Street  
Austin, Texas 78701

Re: Testimony for Commission on Immigrants Affairs meeting. (04/13/2015)

Good Evening Honorable Commission Members,

My name is Cássia Santa Helena, and I am here with my colleagues, Amanda Cartwright and James Nichols. We are graduate Social Work students at Texas State University who have formed Próximos Passos, a working group researching and advocating for immigration reform at the local level. We are here today to show our support to President Obama's recent executive action for immigration reform, and to urge you to recommend the current Austin City Council and mayor to do the same by reaffirming their commitment to immigration reform by Council resolution and by adding their signatures to an amicus brief supporting the President's executive action.

I am an immigrant who recently became a naturalized American citizen. Just a month ago, I would not speak here in front of you. Even though I was a legal resident, I still did not have any political power in the country where I have been living for the last 10 years.

However, I was already having a much better life than many immigrants who are still not allowed to work, to voice their opinion, to state their needs, or to have a peaceful life with their families because of fear of deportation and consequent separation from their loved ones. These are just some examples of hardships, but there are many others.



I would like to briefly share my story because I have been in a situation where I did not have a voice, or a commission such as yours to help me. The process to obtain a green card is long, overwhelming, and expensive, with many complications along the way. It took me an average of 40 minutes holding on the phone just to ask a question to an immigration officer. I had to go through many fingerprints, background checks, and physical exams, such as a mammogram and a HIV test when I applied for my green card because this is the standard. At one point, the immigration officers lost my paperwork, after I have been waiting for 2 years, and paid all of the fees, to interview with a counsel and finalize the process. It took a letter to Senator John Cornyn and his involvement and political power for the officers to find my paperwork and continue my process. During this time, I had to be away from my husband. According to the immigration laws, 2 years away from your loved one is not hardship enough. My husband and I have been together for 11 years, but that particular time was incredibly difficult, especially because he spent one of those years deployed to Afghanistan.

The point is, even when someone is eligible to apply for a green card, it can be challenging. Now, imagine when someone is living in the shadows when their only mistake was to want a better life for themselves and their families. Clearly, nobody leaves their own country, where they have legal rights, if it wasn't for an extreme hardship.

Please know that there are other cases that are even more complicated than mine. Also, there are many immigrants who will never be able to come here and speak to you. Although we live in a democracy, many residents will encounter barriers such as lack of knowledge regarding the political process, lack of fluency in English, or legal issues.

The political process can be intimidating even to highly educated people, so please Commission Members, we beg you to use your expertise and political alliances to protect, support, and find real solutions for immigrants in this country. Even though, there are not thousands of immigrants present in this meeting, remember they are out there, and they count on you to speak for them.



Please urge the Austin City Council to restate their support to Obama's Immigration Reform, and to take concrete actions to facilitate the immigration reform here in Austin. Such steps include signing an amicus brief supporting the President's executive action in upcoming court challenges, as well as allocating additional city resources towards educating and supporting vulnerable immigrants and their families as part of Austin's Welcoming City initiative. Please remember that these are just the first steps to a more humane and efficient immigration system. A lot more needs to be done, so let's keep fighting for individual's rights to well-being, dignity, and prosperity.

Thank you very much for your time,

Cássia Santa Helena

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Helena", written over the printed name "Cássia Santa Helena".





# Immigration Reform in Texas: Executive Action

To Stakeholders of Immigration Reform:

## Facts:

- President Barack Obama issued an Executive Action on Immigration on November 20, 2014 (United States Department of Homeland Security [USDHS], 2015)
- The Executive Action is an expansion of DACA to include all immigrants who entered the US before age 16 and have lived here continuously since January 1, 2010. (USDHS, 2015)
- DACA allows a temporary work authorization of two years which will be expanded to three years through the Executive Action (USDHS, 2015)

DACA is already an existing program which limits beneficiaries based on outdated language. Two days before the opening of reception for applications of this expansion, Texas Judge Andrew Hanen declared a temporary injunction halting the process (State of Texas et. al. v. United States of America et. al., 2015). A major argument in favor of static immigration policy is that progress will end up an economic burden to the State of Texas (Werlin, 2015). According to FWD.org (2013-2014):

- With Immigration reform, the federal deficit would be reduced by \$897 billion over 20 years
- \$329 billion would be added to the American economy if DREAMers were granted citizenship
- 3.22 million jobs would be created by 2024 with immigration reform
- 2.1 million DREAMers were brought to the United States as young children and are unable to gain citizenship without reform
- 11 million immigrants do not have a pathway to citizenship without reform

In December 2014, the City of Austin passed Resolution 20141211-125 to support the Executive Action as part of being a Welcoming City. Since the Resolution, the Executive Action was halted in the appeals process. In response to the Texas Federal Court ruling, Governor Abbott (2015) was quoted, "In Texas, we will not sit idly by while the president ignores the law and fails to secure the border." As informed Texans, Próximos Passos calls on you not to sit idly by. Take these next steps with us.

## What you can do:

- Contact your representative. Próximos Passos is calling on you to encourage the City of Austin to uphold Austin's reputation as a Welcoming City by forming concrete steps for supporting reform and voice Austin's continued support for the Immigrant Community.
- Stay informed. Sign up for direct updates from The White House at <http://www.uscis.gov/immigrationaction>
- Show your support. There are many organizations with events throughout the Central Texas area who are passionate about reform. See back for details.
- Sign the petition. [http://launiondelpuebloentero.nationbuilder.com/ar\\_support\\_petition](http://launiondelpuebloentero.nationbuilder.com/ar_support_petition)
- Take our survey. <https://www.surveymonkey.com/s/6VT5WTJ>
- Join the trend. Follow us on Twitter @Proximos\_Passos #immigrantrightstx #immigraciontx



# Immigration Reform in Texas: Executive Action

## Central Texas Immigration Advocacy Organizations

- American Civil Liberties Union of Texas-  
<http://www.aclutx.org/strategic-campaigns/immigrants%E2%80%99-rights-campaign/>  
American Gateways- <http://www.americangateways.org/>  
Austin Immigrant Rights Coalition- <http://austinirc.org/>  
Casa Marianella- <http://www.casamarianella.org/>  
Catholic Charities Central Texas- <http://ccctx.org/>  
FWD.us Austin Chapter- [http://www.fwd.us/chapter\\_aus](http://www.fwd.us/chapter_aus)  
Grassroots Leadership- <http://grassrootsleadership.org/>  
Pax Christi Austin- <http://paxchristitexas.org/austin/>  
PODER- <http://www.poder-texas.org/index.html>  
Reform Immigration for Texas Alliance- <http://reformimmigrationfortexas.org/>  
St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church- <http://www.staopen.org/our-ministries/social-justice/>  
Texans for Peace- <http://www.texansforpeace.org/index.htm>  
Texas Organizing Project- <http://organizetexas.org/campaigns-page/immigration/>  
Texas United for Families- <https://www.facebook.com/TexansUnitedForFamilies>  
University Leadership Initiative- <http://universityleadershipinitiative.org/>  
Workers Defense Project- <http://www.workersdefense.org/>

## Resources

- FWD.us (2013-2014). *Hard numbers: Why immigration reform matters*. Retrieved from  
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Office of the Governor Greg Abbott (2015, February 17). *Governor Abbott delivers state of the  
State address, releases Governor's budget*. Retrieved from  
<http://gov.texas.gov/news/press-release/20543>  
State of Texas et. al. v. United States of America et. al. Document 145 (TXSD 2/16/2015)  
Retrieved from [http://www.txs.uscourts.gov/notablecases/1-14-cv-  
254\\_145X20977588\\_0.pdf](http://www.txs.uscourts.gov/notablecases/1-14-cv-254_145X20977588_0.pdf)  
United States Department of Homeland Security (2015, March 3). *Executive actions on  
immigration*. Retrieved from <http://www.uscis.gov/immigrationaction>  
Werlin, Beth (2015, February 17). Five things to know about the Texas court decision on  
immigration action. *American Immigration Council, Immigration Impact*. Retrieved from  
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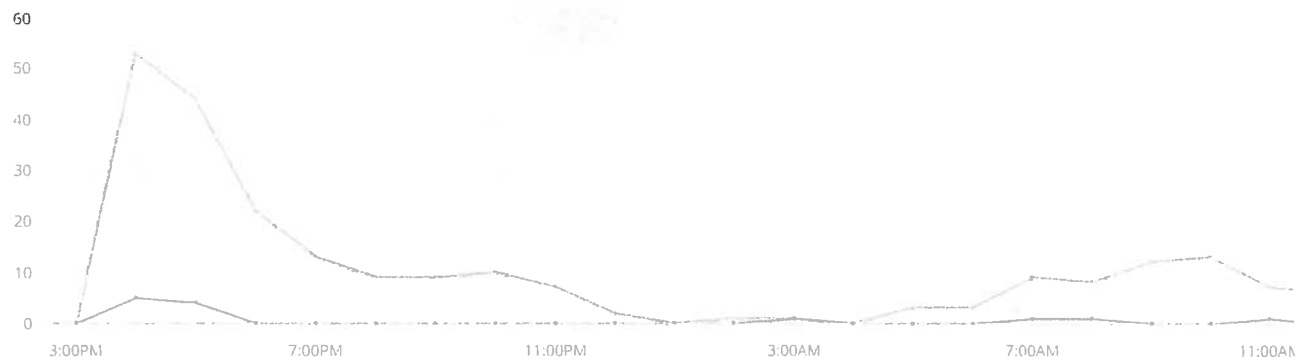
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